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Attribution, referencing and commencing HE students as novice academic writers: Giving them more time to 'get it'

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Abstract*

The requirement for commencing higher education students to apply principles of attribution in their early academic writing frequently creates frustration both for students and academic teaching staff. Teachers often provide information on the necessity of attribution, and considerable detail on the mechanics of how to reference, and express frustration at the failure of some students to demonstrate this in their writing. In turn, many students appear overwhelmed and confused by the expectations placed on them as early academic writers. This paper explores these expectations and questions current assessment practices, advocating a longer period of formative learning before students are required to competently and accurately apply attribution principles and referencing conventions in their writing. Using the threshold concept framework (Meyer & Land, 2005), it suggests viewing attribution as a 'conceptual gateway' through which students must pass in becoming academic writers, and explores some implications of this for teaching, learning and assessment

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Introduction

As an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educator working closely with undergraduate students and academic staff, I frequently act as 'go-between', attempting to unpack academic expectations and requirements and make them more visible to all concerned. A constant source of angst for both groups is the academic conventions around attribution – in particular citations and referencing. The students frequently struggle to apply these conventions correctly, and academic staff frequently struggle to comprehend why this is so. Each year the same issues arise, despite provision of a range of learning resources, specific workshops and many reminders regarding the importance of referencing in academic writing. This paper explores why the skills involved in attribution may be less straight-forward than first thought, arguing that they represent a key 'threshold concept' for commencing higher education (HE) students. The paper briefly outlines the Threshold Concept (TC) framework, and uses this to explore ways to better prepare students as academic writers. It makes a case for lowering expectations regarding attribution and referencing for commencing HE students, and increasing the time afforded to them to acquire the necessary awareness and skills. Finally, it asserts that applying the TC framework to attribution within academic writing has the potential to transform practice for both HE students and their teachers, turning what is sometimes a 'battleground' or source of frustration into an enabling experience for learners. This is in keeping with Akerlind, McKenzie, & Lupton (2011), who contend that identifying TCs is valuable for learning "...not only because they represent transformative learning points..., but because they are areas where students are most likely to experience difficulties in their learning" (p. 2).

The Threshold Concept framework

The notion of a TC has tended to be considered in relation to specific disciplinary fields, such as the concepts of "*precedent* in Law, *depreciation* in Accounting...[and] *entropy* in Physics" (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 374). According to Land, Cousin, Meyer, and Davies (2005) certain concepts within disciplines act as "...portal[s], opening up new and previously inaccessible way[s] of thinking" (p. 53). Meyer and Land (2005) describe the 'conceptual gateways' represented by TCs as tending to have three key characteristics – they tend to be transformative, irreversible and integrative, in that they expose the "...previously hidden interrelatedness of something" (p. 373). If applied to academic writing for example, when students pass through the *attribution* 'conceptual gateway' they may change from experiencing confusion over why the acknowledgement of sources is given such emphasis in assessment of their writing to understanding its key function within the generation of academic knowledge. However, this process should not be viewed simply as a stage of learning; within the TC framework knowledge is conceived as fluid, messy and abstract rather than linear or necessarily sequential.

So while the TC framework has tended to be applied within disciplines, this paper applies it to an aspect of learning occurring *across* disciplines; namely the development of students as academic writers. Kiley and Wisker (2009) have similarly applied the TC framework cross-discipline, in the context of postgraduate research education. They attempted to identify TCs within the domain of research education in order to better assist Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students in their learning, suggesting that this could have a positive influence on completion rates for doctoral programs and address attrition issues. Of particular relevance to them was helping students to better navigate through the sometimes de-motivating liminal or 'stuck'

spaces preceding acquisition of new TCs (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). Kiley and Wisker were concerned that HDR students not "... remain stuck to the extent that they lose confidence and seriously question their identity as researchers" (p. 433).

The 'liminal space' referred to by Kiley and Wisker (2009) is an important feature of the TC framework. It is a space in which a learner's previous conceptions and understandings may no longer apply or seem useful, yet newer formulations of meaning to explain the world from the context of their discipline have not yet fully developed. It is a troublesome space often requiring a "letting go" of some previous ways of making sense of the world; a state in which "... existing certainties [are rendered] problematic and fluid" (Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014, p. 201). This paper contends that in relation to academic writing development, HE curricula tend not to accommodate or allow for this liminal space – for example focussing on informing early academic writers of the mechanics and written discourse of attribution without addressing the underlying rationale for it. Rather than allowing students the time to navigate through the inevitable liminal space involved in acquiring the attitudes and awareness to be effective academic writers, the teaching of a 'shorthand' version is attempted. The cart is put before the horse, with referencing presented to students in a reduced form as if it were not much more than a simple process of placing a series of commas, full stops, brackets, and other information in a particular order.

An important aspect of the liminal space experienced in acquiring TCs, implied in the term 'troublesome', is that if learners are not prepared for this space or provided reassurance that it is temporary they may lose confidence in themselves or question their ability to cope. For teachers this can necessitate promoting resilience in learners in order to help them persevere and tolerate the inevitable

uncertainty involved in learning (Land et al., 2014). McCulloch and Field (2015) go a step further, advocating measures to "... avoid, circumvent or ... shorten the time [students] spend in the uncertain and distressing 'liminal' space" (p. 4). However others, including Land (as quoted in Rhem, 2013), contend that "... liminality is a necessary element of transformative learning" (p.4). Like Land, I would argue that given its value for deep learning, what is required is not avoidance of this stage of liminality but adequate *preparation* of students for it, and development of curricula that *accommodates* it. A starting point in this process is to examine our expectations of commencing students as novice academic writers.

Examining our expectations

I recently had a discussion with a unit coordinator regarding academic support for learners in completing a particular assignment task, which concluded with the unit coordinator stating "... and of course I expect their referencing to be 100% correct". The unit coordinator was somewhat taken aback when I replied, "Why? Most of the academic staff cannot reference 100 % correctly, so why would you expect a Year 1 student to be able to?" Importantly, this was not sarcasm, but an attempt to have acknowledged that effective attribution and referencing present challenges at *any* level of academic writing.

The central argument of this paper is that HE teachers need to carefully examine their expectations of commencing student performance as academic writers, to see if they are reasonable. In addition, they need to examine how their teaching and assessment practices influence learner expectations of their own performance, since this can significantly influence perceptions of self-efficacy and capacity to cope and succeed.

One difficulty for HE teachers is the distance between where they are currently at in terms of disciplinary knowledge and understandings and where their students are starting out from. It can be difficult for teachers to appreciate the conceptual difficulties experienced by their students or remember how they themselves thought as discipline novices, before having acquired key disciplinary TCs. It is this phenomenon that can lead teachers to sometimes discount the challenges faced by learners to reach key points, and have expectations of the pace of learning that may be unrealistic or unreasonable for some students. This applies as much to the development of students as academic writers as it does to their acquisition of key discipline concepts and content.

Land et al. (2005) equate the process by which learners are "... made ready for, approach, recognise, and internalise threshold concepts" as akin to a journey (p. 57). However, according to McCulloch and Field (2015), too often TCs are simply outlined to students as required *destinations*, without provision of the time, space and directions needed to get to those places. They advocate 'intentional' curricula and teaching design as a means of enabling learners to acquire TCs, arguing that teaching that starts with where the students are at and leads up to TCs can be empowering for learners and impact positively on student well-being. As such, for McCulloch and Field a TC represents both a *point of arrival* and the point of departure for the *next* journey the learner will take into the discipline. Their analysis suggests a link between developing effective means to empower and assist students to acquire TCs and ultimate student success and retention.

An important aspect of the TC framework is that 'troublesome knowledge' and points where transformation may be required provide learning opportunities. There is value in noting ways in which students may discuss and attempt to make sense of their learning, even

when they fall short of acquiring transformative concepts. In relation to *attribution*, this could mean that rather than attracting penalties, imperfect attempts could more often be recognised as stages indicating that the learner is heading in a positive direction. Particularly in the first year of academic study, there could be less focus on assessing learners' *arrival* at the required destination, and more on acknowledging points along the way. This could be akin to the "supportive liminal environment" advocated by Land et al. (2005) in which it is accepted that transformation typically involves periods of uncertainty and instability as past knowledge and understandings are let go but newer ones are still forming. So for the novice academic writer, it is not expertise that should be expected in the selection and acknowledgement of sources, or perfection in their use of referencing conventions, but rather reasonable approximations. Put simply, there could be a greater focus on what they get right and less focus on what they get wrong.

As intimated above, an important aspect of intentional pedagogy in relation to TCs is preparing learners to experience and tolerate the uncertainty and degree of confusion experienced as they attempt to make sense of their learning; to an extent to 'normalise' uncertainty. So in the academic writing context, rewarding reasonable approximations and informed attempts at attribution may be preferable to holding these attempts up against a benchmark of perfection.

Implications for teaching and learning

According to Perkins (2006), individual learners always must "... construct or reconstruct what things mean ..." for themselves, and it is therefore important for learning to be organised to "... reflect this reality" (p. 35). He also notes that active engagement in learning through discovery tends to result in deeper knowledge. However,

Perkins argues that often educators are reluctant to afford the time required to learners to discover knowledge at their own pace. There is pressure to *accelerate* acquisition, to ensure that all unit content is covered within the limited time allowed. Paradoxically, so-called foundation units within discipline courses also sometimes fail to create space and time for this type of concept acquisition and skills development. Perkins suggests a possible reason for this, noting that there is sometimes resistance from learners to constructivist approaches to teaching and learning, with students expressing a preference to simply be 'told what they need to do'. So to an extent, both discipline teachers and learners may unwittingly conspire to focus on seeking 'quick fixes' to academic writing development, and *both* be resistant to the allocation of more time and space for this aspect of the curricula, sometimes viewed as on the periphery or 'non-core'.

Importantly, studies exploring the implications of the TC framework for teaching suggest that simplifying concepts to make them more accessible to commencing students may not be a sound pedagogical approach (Meyer & Shanahan as cited in Land et al., 2005). There are dangers that over-simplifying concepts leads to naïve understandings that may not easily be shifted or further developed. An implication is that, if accepting the suggestion of this paper that attribution be viewed as a threshold concept within academic writing, learners need to be provided more time to 'get it' and more time to 'get it right', and 'quick fix' approaches need to be resisted.

Conclusion

This short paper is above all else an attempt to provide a 'circuit-breaker' in relation to one important aspect of commencing HE students' experiences as novice academic writers. Undoubtedly, issues with attribution and referencing styles take up a disproportionate

amount of time for both academic staff and students. They also often create a disproportionate amount of anxiety and distress for both, becoming a source of frustration, confusion and exasperation. The focus on attribution and referencing as almost 'rights of passage' in part reflects the importance with which they are regarded by those safeguarding discipline and professional standards. They are quite rightly seen as a fundamental component of the academic knowledge generation process, ensuring credibility, accountability and a strong evidence-base. This paper has argued that it is precisely because of this that the expectations often placed on commencing academic writers seem unreasonable; given its central role and importance, why would a Year 1 academic essay writer be expected to have mastered it in a Semester 1 assignment response? And yet both examination of marking guides and anecdotal comment suggest that this is exactly what is sometimes expected. So this paper seeks to change the conversation between HE learner and teacher in relation to attribution, from one dominated by issues of competence and compliance to one more about the development and fostering of attitudes and shared understandings.

In the field of academic writing the concept of *attribution* clearly is both troublesome and transformative, two key criteria of the TC framework; consideration of *attribution* as a TC may provide valuable insights into what we expect of commencing HE students as academic writers. This paper is in no way advocating a reduction in academic standards; what it is calling for is *more time and space* for students to acquire the awareness and skills they need in order to produce academic writing that appropriately acknowledges all sources of information and accurately applies the required referencing styles and conventions. The suggested approach would involve a much greater focus on attribution and referencing in formative feedback on early written assessment

tasks (to both individuals and cohorts). The expectation for attribution, including citations and referencing, to be completely appropriate and accurate in student writing clearly has a place, but that place is not in the first year and particularly not in the first semester of university study.

Post-conference reflection

Following the formal presentation, conference participants were given the opportunity to discuss key issues and comment from their particular contexts and perspectives. There was agreement that scaffolded and more gradual assessment processes, with more scope for formative feedback on attribution and referencing, are desirable for commencing students; however, the question was raised as to who is best placed to realise this. Meyer and Land (2005) propose "modifying and redesigning curricula" to better enable students to navigate the transitions and "ontological transformations" involved in acquiring disciplinary knowledge (p. 386), and perhaps the same should apply to the process by which novice academic writers develop their academic literacies. It would seem that discipline lecturers must be central to such a process of curricula change and renewal.

In relation to assessment, the point was made that novice academic writers are nearly always also novice academic readers, and that while this may seem obvious, it is not always acknowledged or reflected in early assessment requirements. More consideration could be given to the challenges involved in finding and evaluating academic sources, and on determining at what stage and to what extent novice academic writers (and readers) can reasonably be expected to independently research topics for their early essays. Also discussed was the possibility of 're-imagining' the role of *Turnitin* within HE courses. It was noted that *Turnitin* has the potential to be a valuable learning tool for commencing students

in relation to attribution and referencing, but that currently it is rarely used for that purpose.

The discussion concluded on the point that attribution is a fundamental value underpinning HE learning and teaching, and for that reason, simply telling students about it, expecting it, or even teaching it is insufficient. The understandings and values inherent in the process of becoming a competent and effective academic writer must be acquired gradually and organically over time, with students permitted to walk before they are expected to run. Early written assessments ideally should be designed to enable that process, with commencing student confidence and sense of self efficacy as much in lecturers' minds as the need to evaluate the content knowledge and/or academic literacies development of their students.

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